

The Exception

It's May 1940 and the Nazi army has invaded The Netherlands, where army Captain Stefan Brandt (Jai Courtney) is ordered to babysit for exiled German Monarch Kaiser Wilhelm II (Christopher Plummer). Brandt is no Nazi but a dutiful soldier with a military background. The Kaiser lives in a mansion outside of Utrecht, living with memories of his once-regal past and feeding the estate's ducks. German authorities are concerned that Dutch spies may be watching the Kaiser, so Brandt is also charged with keeping his eyes out for infiltrators. Meanwhile, he is drawn into an exhilarating romance with the Dutch maid Mieke de Jon (Lily James), whom Brandt soon discovers is secretly Jewish and has lost her family in the Nazi takeover.

The Kaiser's wife, Princess Hermine (Janet McTeer), accepts Hitler's rule but harbors hopes for the monarch's triumphant return to Berlin. Meanwhile, the skeptical, avuncular Wilhelm comes to bond with both Stefan and Mieke. When SS chief Heinrich Himmler (Eddie Marsan), visits the mansion for dinner at Hermine's request, his presence creates a chilling wake-up for all, and, just as a Dutch spy presence is discovered in town, Brandt and Mieke look to escape with their lives.

"The Exception" is pure fiction (based on a novel "The Kaiser's Last Kiss"), but that doesn't mean—in dallying with wartime history—it isn't entertaining. Few may even remember that Kaiser Wilhelm was exiled to Holland, but the setting proves an intriguing one for this drama/romance. First-time film director David Leveaux guides a gifted group of actors working with a smart script by Simon Burke.

"The Exception" in the film refers to Capt. Brandt as that rare German with a sense of decency in the New Deutschland. Australian stud Jai Courtney is appropriately stoical, with lantern jaw and all, melting just a bit as he sees threats to Mieke and the Kaiser. Lily James as Mieke (best remembered as a sweet, young thing in "Downton Abbey") downplays her sweetness quotient to persuasively portray the anxious but resourceful young maid, even though she seems altogether too ubiquitous around the palace. The formidable Janet McTeer has a difficult role, being both a scold to her husband and a Nazi toady, but she pulls it off. And Eddie Marsan is totally unnerving as the monster Himmler, a bag of ice-cubes wrapped in SS black.

As the Kaiser, Christopher Plummer, at 87, continues to ride a great career. The actor has been on a winning streak recently in films like "The Last Station," "Beginners," and "Remember." He brings to his portrait of the Kaiser an ease of aristocratic bearing combined with certain orneriness and a mellow appreciation of the vagaries of life. He's a man of many moods, all nicely observed.

(The film, now in theaters, is rated "R" and runs 107 mins.)

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